

Jesus in North America (8). **The Meek and Mild Jesus**

When we look at the image of Jesus as portrayed in the nineteenth-century, we see a marked shift in emphasis. American theologians focussed on the Second Person in the Trinity more than the First Person. They painted a sentimental version of Jesus. They argued that any God worth worshipping had to be loving and near. Only through an intimate walk with Jesus and not doctrines could Christians live their faith. This was made plain in nineteenth century devotional manuals and theological works, which increasingly placed Jesus at the heart of the spiritual life, defining that life not as submitting your minds to God but as inclining your heart to Jesus. Jesus was portrayed as always patient, ever welcoming, ever-inviting, ever-affirming, even embracing the demons in His mercy. "By the 1840's," Donald Scott has argued, "preaching and worship increasingly centred on the figure of Christ." In 1867, E.P. Powell, a Congregationalist from Michigan, noted that "the days yearn for a platform and organs of simple piety, instead of dogmas, less of Calvin, and Beza, and Edwards, and everybody else, and more of Christ." In other words, this form of Christianity is not about correct doctrines of divinity. Instead it is about heartfelt personal relationships – between the individual and Jesus and among people themselves. They "efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, and certified him 'meek' and 'mild'," observed Dorothy Sayers.

Henry Ward Beecher (1813-87)

One of the most influential books on Jesus was Beecher's *The Life of Jesus, the Christ* (1871). The "marrow" of Christianity, Beecher wrote, is "to live in him [Jesus], to have him dwelling in us, so to lose our personal identity in his, and have it return to us purified and ennobled." He set the true religion of Jesus against the false religion of the church. Beecher's Jesus came into the world not to die on the cross but to establish a new way to relate to God and other human beings. Critics of this sentimental image of Jesus have pinpointed Beecher as the foremost evangelist for "The gospel of gush," and "a pathfinder on the road to New Age platitudes."

Dwight Lyman Moody (1837-99) and Ira Sankey (1849-1908)

The famous evangelist Moody's preaching was simple, homespun, and sentimental. He wooed his audience with the love of Jesus. Whatever evangelical theology he had, it was Jesus-centric to the core. He had a passion for those without the Saviour. "I look upon this world as a wrecked vessel," he once declared. "God has given me a lifeboat and said, 'Moody, save all you can'." During evangelistic tours he was accompanied by his chorister Ira Sankey (1849-1908), whose task was to provide the music and to "warm up" the audiences for Moody's preaching. But it was Sankey's singing that really opened American hearts. He often sang "Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling" during Moody's altar calls. Many who accepted Moody's altar call attributed their decision to

"Come to Jesus" primarily to Sankey's gospel hymns.

Sankey's hymns were simple melodies with an evangelistic message, often overlaid heavily with emotions. He often drew on modern-day metaphors depicting Jesus not as a mysterious divinity but as a real-life rescuer, saving lost souls from danger. He often cast Jesus as a sweet and gentle shepherd, calling his lost sheep by name. "The Ninety and Nine," Sankey's signature hymn, describes Jesus as a compassionate Shepherd who will not rest until he has brought lambs back into his fold.

The one reason for the enduring popularity of the "Jesus-the Shepherd" hymns is their emphasis on an individual encounter with Jesus. While the Shepherd may have a flock of ninety-nine, Sankey's hymns are not about the flock. They are about a loving Shepherd seeking (and finding) that one lost sheep.

Influence of Hymns and Gospel Songs

The image of a meek and mild Jesus was popularized foremost in song. Thousands of children must have learned in their Sunday schools Charles Wesley's:

Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,
Look upon a little child.

Another children's hymn begins with the line:

Christian children all must be
Mild, obedient, good as He.

In many popular evangelical hymns the encounter with Jesus is described in personal terms – a walk, conversation, or even an embrace.. They refer to Jesus as a divine companion – "our never changing Friend," a "Friend so true." For example, the hymn "What a Friend We Have in Jesus (1855) gained public attention when it appeared in the first edition of Sankey's *Gospel Hymns* in 1875. Today it remains one of the most beloved hymns in American evangelicalism.

Charles Wesley's "Jesus, Lover of My Soul" tells the story of an intimate encounter with Jesus. In this hymn the singer dreams of hiding in the bosom of her lover, her "defenseless head" safe "in the shadow of Thy wing." The schmaltzy "Come to the Garden Alone," describes a Christian meeting Jesus secretly and alone at dawn:

I come to the garden alone
While the dew is still on the roses
And the voice I hear falling on my ear
The Son of God discloses.
And He walks with me, and He talks with me,

And He tells me I am His own;
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.

The Lord of Glory

Far too long, the picture of Jesus as a weak, inoffensive, harmless person has been allowed to go unchallenged. The New Testament certainly does not present Him as such. In his classic *Your God Is Too Small*, J.B. Phillips asks, "Why *mild*? Of all the epithets that could be applied to Christ this seems one of the least appropriate." Phillips notes that this picture of Jesus surely gives the impression of someone who would let sleeping dogs lie and avoid trouble wherever possible; someone who is a bit of a nonentity, uninspired and uninspiring. Mark Galli in *Jesus Mean and Wild: The Unexpected Love of a Untamable God* shows the power of Christ in His militancy – an aspect so frequently ignored in many churches today. In his book he focusses on Jesus as He is portrayed in Mark's Gospel. He points out in Mark that Jesus' call to repentance is stark with far reaching consequences – job, family, and former attachments must be forsaken. He never sugarcoats this call with promises of intimacy with God or having one's deepest needs met. He overturns tables in a moment of righteous anger (Mark 11:15-17). Jesus comes with might and wonder – in stilling storms, in healing the truly blind, in raising the dead – "to frighten us, and thus save us." Jesus says that the end-times will come sooner than anyone thinks and will be so severe that even the faithful will beg for mercy (13:5-37). He calls His disciples not to a life of ease and comfort and safety, but to one of hardship and sacrifice and danger. He sends them out on missions that will take them to the ends of the earth and warns them they will suffer persecution and, in some instances, death (9:35-37; 43-50). The disciples and all others who saw and heard Jesus were strongly impressed with His courage, His fearlessness, His tireless energy, and His air of supreme self-confidence and leadership. The Gospels clearly state He is Love in action, but He is not meek and mild. For Jesus to speak the truth is obviously more important than to make His hearers comfortable. But it is equally clear that His genuine love for people gives Him tact, wisdom, and sympathy.

Repeatedly the Gospel writers use the words "power" and "authority" in regards to Him. He has abolished death, won the victory over the devil, and demands our total loyalty for work in His Kingdom. And He will return in Power, Glory, and Majesty. Galli observes: "This is not the 'meek and mild' Jesus of Wesley's hymn. He is the Jesus of the consuming fire, the raging storm." Our God is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29).

Conclusion

If we preach a Christ who will never offend anyone, we don't preach the Gospel. Dorothy Sayer remarks, "I believe it to be a grave mistake to present Christianity as something charming and popular with no offence in it. Seeing that Christ went about the world giving the most violent offence to all kinds of people, it would seem absurd to

expect that the doctrine of His Person can be so presented as to offend nobody." And she notes that we cannot blink the fact that gentle Jesus meek and mild was so stiff in His opinions and so inflammatory in His language that He was thrown out of synagogues, stoned, hunted down from place to place, and finally crucified as "a firebrand and public danger."

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